The Melville Society NEWSLETTER

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In this issue the editor departs from the custom of this Newsletter by publishing in full an original poem of Miss Helena Gavin of Chicago—a poem inspired by *Moby-Dick* and representing in part the poet's interpretation of the book. It is felt that all our members will wish to read the poem and that this represents the most practical means of circulating it.

MELVILLE EXPLICATOR

There is a very curious and enigmatic, not to say grammatically elliptical, passage in Chapter CXXI ("Midnight, on the Forecastle") of *Moby-Dick* which reads (quoting from the Mansfield-Vincent edition, p. 503):

"Why, my little man [i.e., Flask], you have pretty red hair, but you couldn't get afire now. Shake yourself; you're Aquarius, or the water-bearer, Flask; might fill pitchers at your coat collar."

The second sentence of the quotation seems to make very poor sense as it stands. What Melville probably wrote or had in mind was: "Shake yourself; your Aquarius, or the water-bearer, Flask, might fill pitchers at your coat collar." As revised, the sentence makes eminently good sense. The archaism ("your . . . ") with which Melville begins the second part of the sentence is not uncommon to his style, particularly in such passages as this, in which the dominating tone consists of slightly heavy-handed jocularity.

The Mansfield-Vincent reading appears in all editions of *Moby-Dick* which have been examined, including the first English and the first American. Though the same in all editions, the phraseology and punctuation of the passage clearly seem to be wrong and long overdue for correction. No doubt this is the sort of error which Melville had in mind when he spoke in *Pierre* of the "minute, gnat-like torments" that uncorrected may furnish a "rich harvest . . . to the entomological critics."

—George R. Creeger

The secretary still has available about 15 or 20 copies of *Doctoral Dissertations on Herman Melville: A Chronological Summary*. Copies continue to be available to both members and non-members for 50 cents each, postpaid.

NOTES

Hollywood actor Victor Jory played the part of Captain Ahab in an hour-long dramatization of *Moby-Dick* presented on Sunday afternoon, May 16, to a nation-wide television audience. The program was the Hallmark Hall of Fame. Others in the cast included Hugh O'Brien as Starbuck, Steve Darrell as Tashtego, Lamont Johnson as Ishmael, and Harvey Stevens as Stubb. Some interesting technical problems had to be solved in preparing the play for television.

Hendricks House announced publication of *The Confidence-Man*, edited with notes and introduction by Elizabeth S. Foster, in May ($3.50). Also announced: *Clarel*, edited by Walter E. Bezanson, ($4.00) and a *Melville Handbook*, edited by Harrison Hayford, ($4.00) will be published this autumn.

Eleanor Melville Metcalf kindly draws our attention to two recent foreign books which contain references to Melville. B. E. von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *Freiheit oder Gleichheit* (Salzburg: Otto Muller Verlag, 1953) prints quotations from *Clarel* and discusses Melville as prophet and poet. Cyrille Arnavon, *Histoire Litteraire des Etats-Unis* (Lyons: Librairie Hachette, 1953) contains numerous references and a section on Melville.

Professor Jean Simon, leading Melville scholar in France, has recently left the University of Lille to accept a professorship in American literature at the Sorbonne, Paris.

If Director John Huston's forthcoming motion picture based upon *Moby-Dick* proves to be authentic in its setting and fair to the original story, the Melville Society may be able to share part of the credit. For several months the secretary and other members have supplied information to Huston and his associates on such matters as the ship, the costumes of the whalers, the musical setting, and interpretations of the plot. The entire script for the picture was recently forwarded to the secretary for criticism. According to present plans, the picture will be filmed in Europe.

The annual Melville bibliography has not yet been completed, but at last reports work was continuing. It is hoped that this valuable aid will be ready for distribution soon.

THE WATCHES OF ISHMAEL

By Helena Gavin

I

The owner-pilots' shrill godspeed; short cheers
That die upon the frozen spray;
A dank December breeze on icing sails:
Weft of a seaman's day.

Uncanny movers set the deck astir.
A hovering strangness in the air
Hints of an ancient mariner's eerie plight
On the ocean of his despair,

As the venturous *Pequod*, ivoried, weather-stained,
With tall stiff spars and wrinkled deck,
High mastheads bleached in spectral salt and sun,
Immune to wear and wreck,

Authentic hunter and a phantom barque,
Gray hempen magic sails unfurled,
Glides from the riggers of Nantucket Base
To a wild—and ordered—world.

II

Here move the agile trimmers to the winds—
The steersmen, braced for lurch and dip,
Servers and masters of the fierce Harpoon—
Sting of the preying ship.

Not theirs to chart the course or count the cost
Of bearing outward bound too late:
The branded watcher in the bow is lord,
In his will is their fate.

Chance weaves with freedom down their billowing lanes.
They mount the destined forays well
To snare the dragons of this wilderness
In a Bedford trader's spell.

For league on straining league they hold at bay
The chaos of their friend the Sea,
Who yields their roaring onset, now and then,
A kindling victory.

They face out calm and storm, sing out for whales.
Each life's frail lantern in its cell
Lights the fidelities that guide ships home
Laden, and all seems well—

III

Except to one who signed the *Pequod's* roll
In flight from bafflements ashore—
From Spouter tavern to the seas of God
By the whaleman's secret door.

Wary sojourner in forbidden lands,
Sad Ishmael sees this cruise rehearse
The desperate voyaging of Everyman—
The splendors and the curse.

Earth turns within his masthead reveries:
The caves of malice and mischance . . .
Lost trails . . . lost guides . . . the lancer's daring craft . . .
The entangling lance!

The vast discordance echoes to the stars
Above the fitful music of the days
When sea and sails and blood sing out for Life
In wonder, power, and praise.

Dragged once from swirling death in icy waves
He laughs—mysteriously free:
A stone has rolled away, despair has passed
As the anger from the sea.

A cheer from the unseen renews his day
Whereof the darting whale line stands
For lightning death—or winning shaft of mind
And the oarsmen's steady hands.

A hidden wind that swerves the roving barque
Sings in the cordage, swells a sail—
A breeze of mystery that lifts from time
The Hunting and the Whale.

The masthead dreamer calls to judgment there
Stern truth laid up in ageless scrolls—
To light his brave whale-centered log of doom—
And demon-ridden souls.

IV

In Ahab's trance supernal goings-on
Have chilled all wonder to a curse
On speechless, placeless Might that, sea-enthroned,
Misrules the universe.

No kingdom grows for him by way of love
Of wife or child or friendly clan;
Flame leaps from darkness on a plunging ship:
Perennial woe of man!

The dance beneath the Shadow on the earth,
The faiths by which men build and save
Fade from his vision. Emblems of his Real,
The shark, the encroaching wave.

A mounting gale the captain's mystic woe,
A Spirit-spout that beckons and appalls.
On storm-quelled sailors—all but Ishmael—
The grave disorder falls.

Child of thy firs, I breathe it back to Thee!
The demon-god incites to headlong war,
Confessed and judged in Ahab's battle-cry:
Child of thy firs, I breathe it back to Thee!
Arch-rebel, live or die.

Madness propounds a blasphemous sacrament:
Strike through His mask the omnipresent Foe!
Hurl self and captive crew—one tempered lance—
In heaven-defying throw!

A fitting mark the faceless cachalot
No dart will slay or frighten or confute . . . .
The bold, the cowed, the sane, the lost, go down
The maelstrom of this Absolute.

V

But Ishmael lives. He floats, incredibly,
Where quiet waters cover deep
The broken gear of Ahab's war with God
And his luckless henchmen's sleep.

He hears the sea-dirge wail Leviathan,
And shattering waves, and unavailing skill
Of brave deluded men, and, spreading death,
One blind demonic will.

The rescue ship will take him years beyond
The loud sea-clash of rage and scorn.
The self-same quarrels seethe and flare unsung,
In endless deaths reborn.

Far from the stormier capes, exploring still
The rivers of despair or of release,
He will trace out through long vicissitude
The odysseys of Peace:

The never-tiring thrust against the sea;
The troubling pilgrim's road to Light;
Recurrent battle with the shadow-lords
Of theologic night.

THE *Melville Society* NEWSLETTER
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Melville Society, a group of literary scholars and others interested in the life and works of Herman Melville. The Society seeks to facilitate the exchange of information among its members, to stimulate the study of Melville's life and works, and to encourage literary, historical, and bibliographical research. Membership is two dollars per year and includes all services of the Society. Associate membership (non-voting) is one dollar per year and includes all issues of the Newsletter. Address Tyrus Hillway, secretary, at Colorado State College, Greeley, Colorado.